Sons of Light

In Jesus' time, there were four major religious groups (or "philosophies," as Josephus, the Jewish historian of the time, called them). They were the Zealots, the Sadducees, the Pharisees, and the Essenes. It is impossible to place every person in one group or another, and each group probably contained a number of subgroups. While each group provided a key part of the framework within which God placed the ministry of Jesus, the focus in this essay is on one group, the Essenes.

ESSENE ORIGIN

The Essenes were a fascinating part of Jesus' world. The New Testament does not mention them directly, but its pages contain remarkable similarities with the movement that Josephus believed to be as important as the Pharisees. In 332 BC, Alexander the Great's armies swept through Galilee and Judea. His successors continued his campaign to bring Greek culture to every part of the known world. The Hellenistic worldview glorified the human being through culture, philosophy, athletics, and religion. The devout Jews of the land were deeply troubled by its subversion of their biblical worldview. To the nonreligious, this philosophy was seductive, and soon many of the Jewish people were deeply involved in secular Hellenism.

Initially, Alexander's successors, the Ptolemy family from Egypt, controlled Israel, allowing the Jewish people significant religious freedom. During this time, the Old Testament was translated into Greek, a version known as the Septuagint. Later, the Seleucids, the Greek dynasty m Syria, brought Galilee and Judea into their empire. Ambitious empire builders, the Hellenistic Syrians brought a more aggressive approach to the spread of Greek culture, defiling the Temple in Jerusalem with pig's blood and dedicating it to the Greek god Zeus. The Torah was banned, as were observing the Sabbath and circumcision. To violate these bans meant death.

Faithful Jews, led by the Hasmonaean family (known to history as the Maccabees) revolted. By God's blessing, Judah Maccabee and his brothers were victorious and drove out the pagans, reestablishing Jewish independence for the first time in nearly 500 years. The temple was cleansed and rededicated, and the worship of Yahweh resumed. The Maccabees' great victory became the focus of the Feast of Dedication, known today as Hanukkah (John 10:22).

But soon the descendants of the Jewish heroes, known by their family name, Hasmonaeans, became as Hellenistic as the Greeks had been. They openly flaunted the despised pagan practices and fought bitterly with those who followed the Torah. When Jonathan the Hasmonaean took the office of high priest, it was the final straw. Not only was Jonathan Hellenistic in his lifestyle, he also was not of the line of Zadok, Solomon's high priest, a requirement supported by the religious community.

The Hasidim, a pious group of Jewish believers, had been the main supporters of the Maccabee revolt. They now became the major opponents of the descendants of Judah and his family. Out of the Hasidim (a word meaning "pious ones") came two movements: the Pharisees and the Zealots. While there is still some debate scholars believe that the appointment of Jonathan as high priest was the moment when many Godly priests decided the Temple was now defiled and the true worship of God had ended and formed a separatist movement called by others the Essenes. They declared the religious establishment invalid and established a religious movement dedicated to the restoration of the true worship of God.

While there were apparently Essene communities scattered throughout Galilee and Judea and in Jerusalem itself, the majority of this separatist movement lived in the community of Qumran, near the Dead Sea. Here, in obedience to the prophet Isaiah, they went to the desert to "prepare the way for the Lord" (Isaiah 40:1-5). Though small in number (ancient sources indicate 4,000), they exerted significant influence on the religious community of their day. Their influence continues on our own world through their writings, the Dead Sea Scrolls.

GOD'S ARMY

The Essenes took their devotion to God seriously. Living in the barren Judea Wilderness, they were ascetic, probably celibate, and dedicated to waiting for the imminent "day of the Lord." They believed themselves to be the sons of light preparing for a great battle with the sons of darkness (John 12:35-36). The sons of light would be victorious, and the sons of darkness, ensnared by the power of evil, would be destroyed.

The mission of the faithful community of Essenes was to prepare the way (Matthew 3:3) meaning God's road or path of obedience. They felt they must be ready to take their place in God's army by keeping their hearts and minds pure and their practices obedient. Their lifestyle reflected this commitment. The Essene community was carefully organized. They lived in small, self-sufficient communities having all property in common (Acts 2:44-45). They practiced ritual washing, similar to the baptism practices of John, to purify them of any ritual uncleanness or sin that might disqualify them from being part of God's work. They wore white as a symbol of their purity. They grew their own food and were forbidden to eat food prepared by others. They spent significant time in study and in careful copying of their sacred texts. It is these scrolls, probably hidden when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in the First Jewish Revolt that are known as the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The Essenes were stricter than the Pharisees in observing the Sabbath. They ate a sacred meal as an anticipation of the victory banquet of the Messiah, who would soon arrive (Matthew 26:26-29). They practiced obedience to God and justice to people. Their lives were guided by a principle taken from the Old Testament prophet Habakkuk: "The righteous (just) shall live by his faith" (Habakkuk 2:4).

Those who failed were cut off from the community (2 John 9-10).

The Essenes were committed to opposing the corrupt and wicked religious establishment of the temple in Jerusalem (Matthew 21; 12-13); resisting the interpretations the Pharisees had elevated above the Torah (Matthew 15:1-3); and if possible avoiding marriage because the coming battle would create hardship on raising a family (Matthew 19:ll-12). Josephus described them as those who love God and who love their fellow man (Mark 12:30-31).

The end came for the Essenes when the Romans destroyed Qumran in approximately AD 68. It is likely the Essenes joined in the revolt, thinking it to be the final cosmic battle between light and darkness. This is probably when they placed their sacred scrolls in jars and hid them in caves nearby, to become a gift from God to our generation. Some Essenes apparently escaped to Masada and died there after burying their scrolls near the synagogue. Though this community disappeared from history, its legacy is only now being realized.

THE ESSENES AND THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

A few scholars have suggested that the Essene community included the early Christians. This claim is not clearly supported by evidence to date. It is probable that some of them became Christians in the early years, since many of the Essenes were priests and were concerned about the existing Temple authorities. One scholar has suggested they may be the converts referred to in Acts 6:7. Many scholars have noted the similarity between Essene theology and practices and those of John the Baptist. It is possible he had contact with, or was a member of, the Essene community (he too came from a priestly family but apparently left the priestly practice). None of these possibilities can be clearly demonstrated. What is clear is the similarity of many Essene beliefs and practices to those of the New Testament. Clearly, God provided a context in which the message of Jesus would be understood (even by those who rejected it). It is amazing to see God's careful planning for the arrival of his Son.

Jesus was the Messiah the Essenes longed for. Did they recognize him? That we cannot yet answer. Can they help us recognize him and understand his message better? That answer is a resounding yes! Praise God for preparing for Jesus by creating the Essenes!